

The Things We Had Before by ForbiddenSecrets

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Summary:

Eighth grade passed in a blur. Classes, holidays, tests and events smudging together until one day he was leaving Hawkins Middle School, his backpack bulging under the weight of a year's worth of locker junk he really should have just tossed, and he couldn't quite figure out how he had got there.

The Things We Had Before

Author's Note:

This is a small pre-fic set several years before the main work in this series. While it does allude to a future relationship between Steve and Dustin nothing really happens (really, nothing at all it was less than I expected) in the context of this work and everything that does is from Dustin. This was written to mainly ground my characterizations for the main installment of the series. I hope you enjoy.

Eighth grade passed in a blur. Classes, holidays, tests and events smudging together until one day he was leaving Hawkins Middle School, his backpack bulging under the weight of a year's worth of locker junk he really should have just tossed, and he couldn't quite figure out how he had got there.

Stopping in his tracks he spun back to face the school, a strange emotion coiling in his chest as he took in the building one last time. He felt like there should have been more to it. Something bigger than the crumpled piece of paper shoved somewhere with the rest of the detritus to mark the closing of their middle school years but there wasn't. Only the memories that were somehow more bad than good even though he knew the bad times only took up a fraction of the year they had lived through.

"Dustin?"

Will's voice piped up to his left. The question was almost lost under the hushed unsure quality that had affected how he spoke since the 'Incident 2: This time it's Demo-Dogs'. Over time Will's actions had become steadier, more self-assured, but the way he spoke never improved. Dustin wasn't sure if it was because Will was just quiet like his brother or if the smaller boy still feared saying things that weren't under his control. He had never worked up the courage to ask.

"I'm coming." Turning back to his friends Dustin only felt the strange feeling in his chest grow stronger. They were heading to High School before he had even processed being in Middle School. Sometimes he felt like he was the same twelve-year-old that got lost on the first day between classes and other days, other days he couldn't help but see the tight lines around Mike's eyes, or the way Will avoided being alone, or the almost permanent set to Lucas's shoulders, and he knew that things had changed more for them in the last two years than any of their peers. "It's just kind of weird."

Lucas considered him for a moment before nodding, a decisive gesture that set them all moving back towards the school exit. "Super weird." He added in as an afterthought. "Everything just feels, I don't know..."

"Unfinished?" Mike frowned, eyes darting across their group before setting determinedly forward. Dustin didn't have to be a mind reader to know what he was looking for. Somewhere beyond the endless rows of suburban mom vans Hopper was picking Mike up to spend the afternoon with El, or at least, he was in theory. The man had been known to accidentally flake on pick up duty a time or two. "Yeah, yeah I feel that too. Like there was something that should of happened but then it just," He fished for a word, hands gesturing ineffectively at nothing, "didn't?"

It was a thought that had eaten at the back of Dustin's mind since November. Sure, they had closed the gate and reunited with their missing party member, amidst even more screaming from Mike after everything had calmed down, but it had all felt too easy. There was no climatic end fight or dramatic revelation that shook the very foundations of their town. Heck, the big bad hadn't even crossed over to their world in the end. He kept trying to tell himself that real life didn't work like the movies. Sometimes things really did get resolved before the 'Worst Possible Scenario' could actually happen and even the most extraordinary of situations had a very mundane and real world ending. It seemed that not even the Upside Down and government conspiracies would play out like one of Mike's campaigns.

However, no matter how often he told himself this it never cleared up the feeling that closing a door in the face of a Mind Flayer wasn't

enough to keep them all safe.

“Hurry *up* loser.” An impatient voice cracked across the schoolyard, it’s owner grinning both in exasperation and amusement as she leaned against the bike rack. Only one bike remained leashed to the rack reminding Dustin of a time where they used to all bike to school together. A time before fear slowly changed each and every one of their behaviors even when no one would admit it was the reason why.

Lucas shot over to Max barely sparing the three of them a wave as he went. Despite dating for nearly the entire school year Lucas hesitated before hugging her, receiving a smack to the arm for his reluctance and a reminder that they were going to be late. Dustin couldn’t quite recall what the two of them were doing with their first day of freedom. Probably the arcade. With Max’s reluctance to be home and Lucas’s desire to be wherever Max was the two of them spent an obscene amount of time together drowning their allowance in cheap snacks and attempts to best each other on every last machine. They were cute, disgusting, but cute.

As the two of them peddled away with a last wave, Max’s arms wrapped around Lucas’s waist with more of a desire to fluster her boyfriend than to stay on, Dustin only begrudged how pathetically his first real crush died in the span of a few days and not that one of his best friends was happy with the girl who had quickly become another solid party member. Besides, after knowing her longer he realized that the constant bickering Max enjoyed soliciting and receiving from Lucas would have driven him absolutely crazy.

They continued down to the line of cars, idle chatter about summer plans passing between Mike and Will that Dustin largely ignored. It wasn’t that he wasn’t excited to spend some hard-earned freedom with his friends, it was just that he expected most of these plans to be changed by the time Mike got home and decided to set up an entirely new barrage of things for them to complete before next semester. He was an easy-going guy, happy to hop into whatever daily adventure they had planned, and he wasn’t in the mood to ever get in the way of Mike’s obsessive need to plan that had leached from their diminishing D&D campaigns into their daily lives.

Between one breath and the next Mike went from planning a backyard camp out to wishing them a good night, his sneakers slapping against pavement as he hurried to jump into Hoppers car before it took off. Dustin caught a brief glimpse of the mans irritated face, which he couldn't blame these student pickups were hell, before the car burned out of the parking lot.

"And then there were two." He offered aimlessly, pleased to see Will smile anyways out of the corner of his eyes. "Your brother coming to get you?"

"Yeah." The smaller boy agrees, looking chagrined despite being picked up nearly every day since November by either his mom, his brother, or even sometimes Nancy. No amount of bargaining for freedom had managed to move his family an inch since his possession. He knew how much Will hated it, but he couldn't help but feel a little jealous. No matter how many nightmares he had, no matter how many times he saw his friends be torn apart in that stupid junk yard because of *his* stupid plan, there was no one for Dustin to turn to in his house. Sure, Yertle was a great listener, but his advice was just awful. "It's kind of annoying." Will admits after a moment, eyes downcast like he was avoiding his own admission.

Bumping shoulders with Will lightly he turns towards the one approaching car pumping music loud enough to be the elder Byers boy. "Yeah." It's a lame response but it's all he has. He's sure it is kind of annoying but there isn't much he can do about it and while he totally gets where Will is coming from he also totally gets where Jonathan is coming from too. There wasn't much to do but deal with how things were. "See you Sunday? For... uh..."

"The Pizzeria." The younger Byers shakes his head, already moving towards his brother inching through the line. "You haven't listened to a single thing we've said all week."

"Have too!" He shot back as Will slipped into the passenger seat. "I just haven't really remembered any of it." He admitted to himself mumbling. He'd been a little distracted. Saying goodbye to their AV club, their middle school years, and, he realized in a part of his mind that he refused to verbalize, The Party had kept his head buzzing through the past few days. Things were just so *different*.

“And then there was one.” Sighing he sat down on the sidewalk and watched the crowd began to thin to almost nothing. Right when he was about to give up and walk home the BMW he had been waiting for peeled into the drop off. At the wheel a frazzled looking Steve Harrington glanced around haphazardly until his eyes landed on Dustin, a crooked smile flowing across his face.

About time, Dustin thought as he stood up, knocking invisible dust off his pants as he approached the car. “You’re late asshole.”

“Yeah yeah.” The older teen reached over to unlock the door. “You know I *should* be heading to some pre-graduation parties not picking your ungrateful ass up.”

“Then why aren’t you?” He shot back as he slid into the passenger seat. The lazy shrug he received in reply was about what he expected. Ever since, well, everything happened Steve didn’t spend a lot of time with other teenagers. After the first incident he spent most of his time with Nancy and after the second, and the break up that never was, the older boy spent most of his time ghosting around the rest of the ‘in the know’ crowd. This primarily consisted of Max, which resulted in another fight with Billy that went marginally better than the first (at least Steve was able to walk away this time), and himself with the other kids mixed in now and again. It was a little sad but as he settled into the sun warmed seat with his bag knocking about his ankles like he did every Friday he wasn’t about to point that fact out too loudly. “Excited to Graduate tomorrow?”

“Thought I might skip it actually.”

The statement was tossed casually into the space between them, but Dustin could hear the tension underlining it. He fought to keep a frown off his face. “You’re not allowed to skip it.”

“Excuse me?”

“I *said*,” He enunciated slowly, teasing, “You’re not allowed to skip it.”

The car tuned out onto the main road, picking up speed as irritation settled between Steve’s brows. “And why is that?” The ‘t’ was clipped

and sharp, a warning note he heard all too often from Max when she was pushed too far by Mike.

Looking casually out the window, watching houses blur into shops and back into more houses, he gestured in a complicated sweep meant to imply that the answer was obvious. He was pretty sure Steve wasn't even looking but it was the intent that counted. "Well I'm not going to watch Tommy H."

"You're coming?" And oh did that sound just a little too incredulous for a guy who spent at least one day a week hanging out with a bunch of middle schoolers.

"Uh duh?"

Steve made a strangled noncommittal noise and fell silent, eyes trained on the street like he couldn't drive the same little roads he took every day in their pinhead sized town blindfolded. After a few more moments of silence punctuated only by the sound of tires on asphalt, the teen's cassette player stubbornly refusing to let go of one tape for the last several months rendering them unwilling to listen to it ever again, Steve sighed in that defeated little way of his that meant Dustin had once again won. "Okay, fine whatever I'll show up."

"Good. And now, if we hurry, we might actually make the movie on time." He peacefully downed out Steve arguing that they had plenty of time, thank you very much, pleased that Steve was just as easy to distract as he always was.

He was going to miss this.

It was another thought that he had been trying all week not to dwell on. While they all still had each other the reshuffling of their group dynamics often left Dustin feeling a little like an outsider. Which was fine, really, sort of. Well it was fine most of the time. Besides, usually when he was feeling a little too uninvited to Max and Lucas time or avoiding Mike's hell-bent desire to protect El and Will until they socked him in the face he could go bother Steve into taking them somewhere fun. Or at least out. Steve's ideas of fun weren't always in line with what he found interesting.

But that was okay too because they could compromise, today being his turn to pick out what movie they were seeing. The Goonies looked like it could entertain them both (because he was considerate unlike Steve who kept picking the weirdest serious films that bored him to tears) and sometimes the older teen would drive him to the city on the weekend to public science exhibits that looked like they bored Steve right back. His weird friendship with the high school senior filled all those gaps left by his fractured friend group until he didn't really notice them anymore.

So yeah, he was going to miss this a lot.

The car's engine cutting snapped him out of his thoughts, dragging him back to the present in which they had somehow teleported to the Hawk Theatre. Okay, maybe Will was right to criticize him.

"You okay Dustin?"

"Just tired." He smiled widely, flashing teeth that he never got sick of showing off, as he tried to ignore the added fluttering sensation in his lower stomach that Steve's warm hand on his shoulder elicited. It wasn't a feeling he knew how to deal with on an average week. It was extremely unappreciated today when he couldn't sort out up from down let alone what to do with his sudden inclination to sit way too close to another boy. Yikes. "Let's go before all the good seats are taken."

He slipped out of the car quickly, annoyed at how aware he was of Steve's fingers slipping down his arm as he moved, and into the sunlight. There wasn't really anything to do about it anyways. Steve was heading off to college in less than a month to set up his apartment. Even if he wasn't leaving (and honestly did he have to leave the state as well as Hawkins?) there wasn't a chance in hell he would have looked at Dustin as anything other than a very male and very underaged friend. Not that he was even sure that was what he was feeling towards the taller teen and not some conflated friendship familial mix. He pushed the feeling away like he did every time it decided to show up, unwilling to deal with whatever it potentially meant.

Still, as he walked out of the warm late spring air towards the ticket

booth, Steve yelling at him to wait the heck up behind him, he decided it didn't matter much. He was going to miss this, and he was afraid of the future in a way he couldn't quite grasp, but for today, he was happy.

Author's Note:

Thank you for taking the time to read my work. It's been ages since I've decided to write something for a fandom and I hope to have the main story up soon. Expect a time jump of roughly three and a half years :)